

Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
“Solutions to Strengthen U.S. Public Safety Communications”
September 26, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

Good morning and welcome to today’s legislative hearing where we will be discussing three important, bipartisan public safety bills. Two weeks ago, we remembered the sacrifices and the heroism of the September 11th attacks. The ceremonies across our nation reminded us not just of those Americans we lost, but also of the hard work our public safety community does day-in and day-out to keep us safe. This is evident again as our first responders manage the consequences of Hurricane Florence.

Whether at home or at school, our children learn an early age that when an emergency strikes, you should dial 9-1-1. But like all technology systems, our 9-1-1 systems must be preserved and improved to deliver potentially life-saving services reliably and seamlessly when called upon. This committee worked in a bipartisan manner this Congress to enact improved rural call completion so that call goes through, as well as Kari’s Law to ensure that when we dial 9-1-1 no matter where we are, that call will go through without the need to dial another number.

With rules finally approved for NTIA and NHTSA to move forward on distributing funds for Next Generation 9-1-1, I’m pleased these dollars will be finding their way to localities. Whether it is these dollars, or the much larger share of fees collected on your phone bill, we have a duty to ensure that the 6,000 Public Safety Answering Points, or PSAPs, nationwide that manage our 9-1-1 system are actually receiving these vital funds.

Unfortunately, we have found that some states have diverted 9-1-1 funds that were assessed for this specific purpose. We have seen states divert funding directly into their general fund, while others use this money for another public-safety related purpose that may have nothing to do with the 9-1-1 system. The result is the same: PSAPs aren’t getting the resources they are promised.

Today, we will discuss H.R. 6424, the 9-1-1 Fee Integrity Act, which would clarify for states and municipalities that funds raised *for* 9-1-1 are only spent *on* 9-1-1.

We will also discuss H.R. 5700, Ms. Brooks' National Non-Emergency Mobile Number Act.

While the FCC designated 9-1-1 as the national emergency number over 50 years ago, the 9-1-1 system is sometimes used unnecessarily in non-emergencies. In order to preserve 9-1-1 services for true emergencies, and to ensure limited public safety resources are not used unnecessarily, some states have adopted an easy-to-remember short code that the public can dial to reach public safety officials in non-emergency situations. However, there is no unified short code, so a traveler driving from Colorado to Oregon might be able to dial "star" *277 in Colorado, "pound" #4357 in Wyoming, "star" *477 up through Idaho, and finally have no short code available at all in Oregon. That's a lot to keep track of.

Ms. Brooks' bill would make things easier, directing the FCC to set up a unified short code that states could choose to adopt.

Finally, we will be discussing H.R. 6003, Mr. Engel's Anti-SWATting Act. This should be a familiar bill given we approved by voice vote last Congress. SWATting is the act of using misleading or inaccurate caller ID information with an intent to trigger a law enforcement response where no real emergency exists. SWATting is dangerous, it is a drain on precious resources, and it is illegal.

Unfortunately, SWATting incidents remain a problem and continue to put law enforcement and innocent bystanders in harm's way. Mr. Engel's bill would stiffen criminal penalties against those who are convicted of SWATting and bolster our public safety officials' ability to serve and protect.

Collectively, the bipartisan bills to be discussed today will strengthen and improve the 9-1-1 system and enhance public safety across the country. I'd like to thank our witnesses for taking time out of their busy week to share their thoughts on these bipartisan bills, and with that I yield back.